

Stories of Impact



It took **Joumana Mualem** and her family four years to escape the turmoil of the Middle East.

They traveled from Syria to Egypt to Bahrain and then to the United Arab Emirates before finally securing paperwork needed to move to Canada. They landed in Peterborough thanks to a private-sponsorship group in autumn 2016 and have since embraced the community as much as it has embraced them.

The family has settled in nicely to their new home, thanks in part to the many programs and services provided by the New Canadians Centre (NCC).

Those services are partially funded by the United Way of Peterborough and District.

This year, the NCC received \$55,122 from the United Way. Hajni Hos, executive director of the NCC, says that money is used for all newcomers to Peterborough, not just those from Syria who

have arrived since late 2015.

“Funding from United Way enables us to support newcomer clients who we would not be able to support otherwise through federal funding for example international students, migrant workers, refugee claimants, etc.,” says Hos.

“But funding is only one benefit we receive from the United Way. Experts at United Way support our staff and board (with) professional development through various workshops. By being a member of the United Way family we are able to network and partner with other community organizations, and help the ones in need together.”

Joumana says the NCC has become a second home of sorts for her family, husband Mohamad Bashar Asfary, daughter Malaka Asfari, 15, and son Faadel Al Asfari, 13.

Early on they started volunteering as interpreters because they speak both Arabic and English. Her son Faadel says he’s been given opportunities to try different things he would not have been able to in Syria and other Middle Eastern countries.

He’s also settled in nicely at St. John Catholic Elementary School, where he has made many new friends.

“I feel like I can speak the way I want to without worrying about being attacked or made fun of,” says Faadel. “It’s very peaceful here with people who appreciate you.”

Wise for his young age, Faadel speaks openly about the atrocities his family faced before finally finding sanctuary in Canada. Their last stop in the United Arab Emirates was fraught with prejudice because they came there from another country.

They had no other place to turn while fleeing the violence that was encircling them. Their home community near Aleppo, Syria, was ravaged by war. Faadel’s father Mohamad was a family doctor whose office was destroyed.

“I felt it would never end,” says Joumana.

The turning point was the day five children were kidnapped from Faadel’s school. Faadel didn’t know the children, however, he has lost touch with other close friends from his home.

“I had one friend who escaped to Lebanon while we were still in Syria. I haven’t heard from him since 2013,” he says.

The four years that followed was full of never-ending stress. For an entire year, the family lived in a hotel, using all of their savings to survive.

“It was like being in a boat trying to get somewhere and we are just stuck in that boat,” explains Joummana. “But you never give up. I wanted to teach them (my children) to not give up.”

With some family already in Canada, they began the process of moving here.

They arrived on Sept. 27, 2016.

Since then, Joummana has started a job with the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board as an Arabic teacher at Peterborough Alternative and Continuing Education. Her husband has been volunteering at Trent University doing medical research as well as interpretation services for the NCC.

Approximately 400 people from Syria are living in the Peterborough area. According to Hos, four families have moved away to join other family members in other communities, however, four new families from Syria have moved here.

Each makes its way to the NCC for support, which is given through community funding provided to the organization.

“How the community has stepped up in the last two years is amazing,” says Hos. “It has allowed us to provide support on a whole new level.”

The show of support is evident by the NCC’s Wall of Hope. When you walk into the building on Romaine Street, you are greeted by dozens of post cards with encouraging messages for new comers to read.

The Wall of Hope campaign is held each holiday season along with the NCC’s Choose Hope fundraiser. People are encouraged to give monthly gifts or one-time donations to the NCC to help new comers achieve success. Donations can be made by visiting www.nccpeterborough.ca.

Beyond this, donations to the United Way campaign will also go a long way to providing continued support and hope for families, like Joummana’s.

“Our kids now have a future,” she says. “Now they can control it.”



by [Lance Anderson](#)

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Robert Hamm

Robert Hamm stared back at a broken man.

The reflection on a scratched mirror above a tiny sink inside his cell at the Central East Correctional Centre in Lindsay was far from the person Hamm wanted to be. He was broken and ashamed of what he had done — what he had put his young daughter through. His cellmate, another drug addict dealing with the vile effects of withdrawal, was no help. Hamm didn't like what he was seeing.

He didn't like the fact that little Reah Jo may never get to know her father. He didn't like being a bad man. He didn't like what his future held if he continued on his destructive path.

Today, Hamm, 35, is a different person. He is clean, sober, and a caring father whose sole purpose is to be there for his little girl, a peppy four-year-old kid unaware of the hardships her father has endured to turn his life around, to be the person many around him knew he could be.

Robert Hamm is a new man.



Hamm started with marijuana and alcohol when he moved to Fort Erie from Brampton with his family when he was around 13 years of age. He was a city kid now in a small town trying to fit in with new friends.

Rebellion set in. He dropped out of high school in Grade 10, took a job at the Fort Erie race track and started experimenting with harder drugs like cocaine.

At 18, Hamm moved to St. Catharines with a girl. Then came the heroin, and it was all downhill from there.

"He would come home and his mother would sit him down and say you've got to be better. You need some help," recalls Hamm's father, Steve.

But drugs had a vice grip around Hamm's life. Everything he did was for that next hit. He resorted to selling narcotics to pay the bills and to itch that constant scratch, that nagging compulsion to get high.

Hamm knew the damage he was doing to himself. He started taking methadone to begin recovery. Everything was going great until he moved to Peterborough.

His mom was sick and he came to help. He soon met another girl, and within two weeks was right back into the drugs. She was living the lifestyle from which Hamm was trying to escape.

His girlfriend became pregnant. She gave birth to Reah Jo 13 days after Hamm's mother died. Her death sent Hamm on a spiral into depression.

He consumed more drugs to mask the pain and sold more drugs to pay for his addiction.

All this soon caught up with Hamm. He was arrested after selling drugs to an undercover police officer in 2014. That landed him in Lindsay jail, but the experience wasn't enough to scare him straight. He was released on bail and went right back to his old ways.

By now he and his girlfriend had racked up domestic assault charges. Court orders were issued so Hamm could have no connection with his ex-girlfriend. He ignored those orders on Dec. 23, 2014, when he brought Christmas presents over to his daughter. He says his ex asked him to stay with Reah Jo while she went to the doctor's office.

He fell asleep with Reah Jo in his arms and woke a couple of hours later to his ex saying the police were on their way.

She had told the doctor that Hamm was with Reah Jo. The doctor, says Hamm, was obligated to notify police because of the couple's history of drugs and assaults.

"The police surrounded the house," recalls Hamm. He spent Christmas 2014 in a jail cell. "It was heart-wrenching," says Steve. "He knew he shouldn't have gone there (to his ex's house). He broke a court order."

Hamm had a court date of Jan. 14 to answer to the charges. His ex was supposed to be there, but didn't show up. Hamm found out from his lawyer that the Children's Aid Society was now involved.

Hamm was told his ex was given two choices: put Reah Jo and her other child into foster carer or a court order would be sought to take them. Reah Jo's mother opted for foster care and Hamm want back to jail.

Broken and alone, Hamm recalls the moment his life changed. That reflection peering at him from the dingy, scratched mirror. Seeing that person, that man who may never see his daughter again. It was too much to bear.

"That was my rock bottom," says Hamm.

Charges against Hamm were eventually withdrawn and he was released from jail with no place to go but the Brock Mission men's shelter.

Steve's girlfriend, Barbara Saunders, intervened. She told him there was no way he was going to a shelter and invited him into her home to live.

"The Robby I had seen was this teddy bear on a road to recovery. I saw all the good in him and I've always been a person to say give people another chance," says Saunders.

Hamm doesn't know if he could have successfully recovered from his addictions if he was living in a shelter. "It was very important," says Hamm. "Barb took me in and she's part of the reason I am who I am today."

Hamm started the long road to recovery. He began setting up meetings with the Children's Aid Society to arrange for supervised visits with his daughter. He was told he would have to make some real changes in his life if he wanted to be a full-time father.

Those changes included battling the demons of addiction and anger. He enrolled in every course available through the John Howard Society, Community Counselling and Resource Centre, FourCAST and the Salvation Army. Many of these programs are funded by the United Way of Peterborough and District, programs that helped Hamm change, eventually becoming Reah Jo's full-time parent.

Hamm has since started his own group, Men Supporting Men, with Garnett Sage and Cody West. They meet every Thursday at the John Howard Society from 6 to 8 p.m. The group is open to all men, no matter what they are dealing with. Hamm says it's a safe place for men to discuss their problems and learn ways to get help.

Although not affiliated, Hamm says the John Howard Society gave them a room to hold the meetings.

On Tuesday morning (Sept. 19), Hamm was given an opportunity to thank the United Way and its many supporters and agencies at the 2017 campaign kickoff breakfast. He delivered an emotional speech about his life.

"There was a big crowd which made me pretty nervous," says Hamm. "But seeing my daughter there was a big help for me. She's turning five in October and she doesn't know what she's done for me."

Sobriety has opened many doors to Hamm. He now works for himself doing property maintenance and construction jobs. He met a new love, Christina Erskine, whom he and Reah Jo now live with.

"She's an amazing woman who gave me a chance," says Hamm. "There's something special about her." As for Steve, he's just proud his son has become the father he knew he could be. "I always knew he had it in him," he says.

Credit: **Peterbio: Robert Hamm**

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<mailto:landerson@mykawartha.com> Peterborough This Week

Erica

“I am not a victim. I am a survivor.”



Erica was living the carefree, college life in Hamilton when she met him. He was wild and fun... everything you want from a college boyfriend. They started dating and within a couple of months Erica was pregnant.

She knew immediately that she was keeping the baby. Erica told him she would do this with him if he chose to stay, or on her own if he didn't. He stayed. Erica took time off school. He continued to party. Despite her requests that he start cutting back on his drinking before the baby was born, he persisted. The more she asked him to slow down, the more heavily he drank. The more he drank, the more abusive his words became. Before long his verbal abuse turned physical. Erica learned to live on eggshells, not wanting to risk harm to her unborn baby. She did whatever she could to keep the peace.

Baby Avery was born. And she was beautiful.

But Erica's joy eroded as the abuse became more and more violent. She didn't know what to do. She was alone in a still unfamiliar city without friends, family or a job. She couldn't afford to go back to school. Leaving Avery alone with "him" was out of the question. Erica was scared and felt trapped but she didn't know how to ask for help because she was convinced this was all in her head, despite the very real bruises.

One night, when Avery was not quite two years old, she witnessed her father choking Erica with such ferocity that she wasn't able to breathe. When he finally let her go, Erica crawled into the kitchen sobbing. Curled up into a ball, she cried out for someone to help her. When she looked up, little Avery was smiling into her eyes. She patted her mom's back and said, 'it's okay, mommy.'

“She is my angel.”

After that incident, Erica and Avery moved out. They rented an apartment six blocks away. Still not ready to admit what was happening and hopeful that things would change, she kept her relationship and continued to spend most of her time with him. But things didn't change and the abuse did not stop.

A year later, she'd had enough. She called her parents and said, "I'm ready to come home." Erica brought Avery to her parents' house, near Peterborough, for Christmas. They never went back.

Coming back to her hometown felt warm and inviting. She and Avery stayed in her parents' basement. Her mother phoned the local YWCA. Erica cautiously attended counselling services. After years of silence, she was finally sharing her secrets. She didn't know what to expect but what happened in that building was truly life-changing.

"I felt validated for the first time. They understood me in a way that no one else could. I told them everything and they didn't think I was crazy."

As part of her counselling, one of the first things they did was create a safety plan. Erica felt a peace of mind she hadn't known in years.

The YWCA has also provided Erica with legal support, financial advice; and even years later, she is still accessing supports from the YWCA through their START program. (hyperlink: <https://ywcapeterborough.org/get-help/start/>)

"The YWCA saved my life. It is a place where I belong."

Today, Erica shares her story with others as a way of offering support. It's not easy to be publicly vulnerable and to relive her horrific experiences; but she believes if she can help one person, it's worth it. When asked what advice she would share with someone in a similar situation, she instantly replied:

"Don't ever think you are too weak to handle it. Trust your inner strength. You are never, ever alone."

United Way Peterborough & District provides long-term priority funding to the YWCA, along with 22 other programs and services in our community.